

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 17THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY
July/August 1979

The Art of The Leak

by Joseph Nocera

When Irwin Arieff first came to Washington nearly six years ago looking for work, the only thing he could find was a position in the press office of the newly-created Federal Energy Office. Arieff is now a reporter for *Congressional Quarterly*, and had wanted a reporting job then, but none was available, so he took the job at the FEO, figuring he could learn something about energy and make enough contacts in the process to find a job he preferred.

As a press officer, the bulk of Arieff's work was supposed to be writing press releases. But because energy was such a new issue, so poorly understood by just about everyone, he spent most of his time on the phone, talking to reporters, congressional aides, and lobbyists of various persuasions, helping them decipher FEO regulations and explaining how FEO decisions would affect things like the price of crude oil and the supply of natural gas.

At first, Arieff performed his job the way he thought his superiors wanted him to. He wrote releases that accentuated the upbeat and buried the negative, and in his dealings on the phone, he answered questions truthfully but cautiously, never volunteering information that reflected poorly on the FEO unless he had to. But before too long he began to have second thoughts about his role in the FEO press office. He started to see the agency, and particularly its head, William Simon, as pro-oil company, which offended

Joseph Nocera is an editor of The Washington Monthly. He was assisted in the research for this article by Walter Jacob.

his sensibilities, and he thought that a lot of FEO regulations were rigged to help the companies at the expense of the consumer. So after a few months, Arieff forgot about playing the loyal press agent, and instead assumed a role he felt much more comfortable in: he began to leak.

As a minor press officer, Arieff wasn't privy to much of what went on in the upper echelons of the agency, but he did his best with what he had. When a friend on Capitol Hill would call to get some facts and figures for an upcoming hearing, Arieff would supply him with what he wanted, and then volunteer a little nugget intended to embarrass FEO at the hearing. Other times he would leak proposed regulations. Once he wrote a lengthy press release explaining how a whole series of new regulations would mean a substantial increase in the price of oil. The press release was killed by Simon, and Arieff was told that nothing was to be put out on the new rules. That angered him, so on his lunch break, Arieff took a copy of the release to a friend at *The Wall Street Journal*.

Washington is a place full of people, like Arieff, who leak—and full of reporters who encourage them. Leaking, of course, goes on anywhere there is a newspaper and a city hall, but in Washington the volume of leaks is immense, and the course of government business is regularly influenced as a result of leaks. Every day stories are written in Washington containing information attributed to "sources" or "informed sources" or "administration officials" or "critics." Oftentimes, there are stories based on "documents

CONTINUED